Humans, Elephants, and Interspecies Intimacy in The Chitwan National Park, Nepal- Piers Locke

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It is 5am and as I open the door of my hut I see Sitasma Kali and Kha Prasad silhouetted in the wintry mist. Mother and baby are waiting as usual, tethered to their post, ready for the first duty of the day - grass cutting. Barefoot, armed with a stick and a sickle, and carrying a sack to sit on, I approach my elephant companion. As usual, she extends her trunk, curling it round me for an olfactory probing in what has become a communicative ritual of loving trust. Her warm breath caresses my skin as my hand strokes the delightful grooves of her many-muscled trunk. She is the only elephant I submit myself to in this way. Another could easily respond with violent animosity.

I give the command "baith!" and Sitasma descends delicately, crouching on her knees. I remove the sikri (tethering chain) that connects her right foot to the kambha (post), and put a kasni (neck chain) around her large, wrinkled neck. I use the sack to gently beat the dust off her, and then I make the gesture of supplication that connects my head and my heart to her divine body. Now I am ready to mount her. I am sitting on a sack on her neck, positioned between the hairy crown of her head and her bony shoulders. I insert my feet into the atargal (braided stirrups) that connect to the kasni. Now I am ready to apply my toes to the soft skin behind her ears, creating a kinesthetic union of human and elephant. I shout "maiel!" Sitasma stands, and I depress my toes to communicate a request to move forward. Accompanied by her infant son Kha, we plod off toward the river, beyond which lie the grasslands where we will cut fodder for the day.

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The human-elephant relationship intimated here represents a privileged form of intimate, interspecies relation rarely subject to ethnographic inquiry. By thinking

about human-elephant relations in terms of inter-subjective interactions, my research raises questions about human exceptionalism in the methodology of ethnography. This exceptionalism is evident in scholarship that implies humans alone can be disregarded from the webs of interspecies dependency by which we understand other life (Haraway 2008:11). It is a tradition of scholarship in which humanity has been conceptually segregated from other life forms, a tradition subject to reinvigorated critiques by scholars seeking to establish modes of enquiry better equipped for thinking about the role of nonhumans in human life (Castree et al 2004). Recent trends in the sciences of sentient and socially complex mammals are also relevant here, reminding us of the blurred and problematic boundaries between the social and the natural sciences. For example, by arguing that culture, in the qualified sense of socially acquired and transmitted skills and knowledge, is not unique to humans, the new sciences of animal behavior and cognition give us cause to question the rationale responsible for configuring what is beginning to seem like an outmoded division of intellectual labour. Indeed, in a recently published article titled *The Phenomenology of Animal Life,* the authors boldly argue that ethology, the observational science of animal behavior, should more properly be conceived of as social rather than natural science. These developments- posthumanist critiques of human exceptionalism and the biocultural sciences of nonhuman culture and personhood, challenge the dualist opposition of the cultural human and the natural animal. In so doing they inform many of the multispecies ethnographies of shared life that are emerging in response to the ontological insularity of humanism, and the ecological de-contextualization that it encourages (Latour 1998:16).

Now multispecies theorists are arguing that not only humans engage in semiosis (Kohn 2013), that not only humans exercise meaningful agency (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010), that human life is constituted not in opposition to, but through relations with animal others (Lestel and Taylor 2013), that humans construct their social and ecological niches in consort with companion species (Fuentes 2012), and therefore that there can, and should be an "anthropology beyond humanity" (Ingold 2013). Consequently, I argue that we need to reconsider the cross-species

continuities between humans and similarly sentient companion species, whilst also considering how their lives have been configured through their social, historical, and ecological intersections. I should like to do so by attending to the affective aspects of an ethnographic apprenticeship as an elephant handler in the government stables of the Chitwan National Park, Nepal. This involved life in a hybrid community of humans and elephants, where I came to focus on my empathic and embodied engagement with an elephant (or *hatti* in Nepali) named Sitasma Kali, and which compelled me to rethink the typically anthropocentric boundaries of personhood. I want to present to you then, an account of a relationship forged across species boundaries, that led me to reconceive my research as an ethnographic study of two types of person, only one of which is human.

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The site for this interspecies relationship is the enclaved institution of the government elephant stable or *sarkari hattisar,* a regimented space where human and elephant lives are bound together in service to the imperatives of protected area management. The occupational community constituting this institution draws on a long history in Nepal of capturing and managing elephants for trade, tribute, hunting, and ceremony. Physically enclosed and socially segregated, with its own distinctive Hindu ritual practices, the *hattisar* represents a total institution since virtually all aspects of life are conducted together, under a single authority, according to a systematic schedule, deriving from a rational plan. However, comprising a hybrid occupational community of humans and elephants, who are treated as animals, persons, and gods, this may be better conceived as a multispecies total institution (Locke 2011a, Locke 2013). The particular *hattisar* at which I apprenticed was the Khorsor Elephant Breeding Center, where pregnant females are brought to give birth, and where their offspring are trained for working life in the National Parks and protected areas of Nepal's lowland Tarai. This enables the government, as a signatory to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), to maintain its population of working

elephants now it is no longer able to legally purchase elephants across national borders.

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It is from this location, among a community of breeding elephants, that I develop the proposition of nonhuman personhood in relation to fieldwork experience, local understandings, and the cognitive and behavioral animal sciences. This exploration of human-elephant companionship is also conceptually situated in relation to ethnoelephantology, a framework for understanding multiple aspects of the human-elephant nexus across time and space (Locke 2013). Inspired by ethnoprimatology, the interdisciplinary, multi-method study of human-primate interconnections (Fuentes 2010, 2012), it argues for recognition of the shared subjective agency of human and elephant, exploration of the mutual entanglements of their lives and landscapes, and the applicability of methodological perspectives from the social and natural sciences to better understand this kind of interspecies intersection (Locke 2013).

Ethnoelephantology represents an attempt at theorizing an integrated framework for investigating the myriad interconnections that bind humans to wild, captive, and symbolic elephants through enterprises of power, wealth, worship, pleasure, and preservation. Similarly, multispecies ethnography represents an attempt at theorizing a more-than-human approach to shared life that challenges the ontological oppositions of humanism, with its great divides between nature and culture, human and animal, that sequester humanity in an epistemologically impoverished space. However, it is crucial to appreciate that the conviction in nonhuman personhood I discuss here preceded anthropological theorization, arising instead from the transformative intensity of multispecies fieldwork.

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<u>Experience, Intimacy, and Apprenticeship</u>

It was participant observation with elephants as well as humans that led me to question the Western idea that implicitly equates humanity with personhood, the latter considered an exclusive attribute of the former as self-knowing, self-directing agents in social worlds (Taylor 1985). At this time too, I was unaware of the extent to which the animal behavioral and cognitive sciences are casting doubt on this exceptionalist view, confirming elephants also as self-conscious, intentional, and social beings (Poole and Moss 2008, Varner 2008). I came to question the parameters of personhood through my willingness to surrender my being and to open myself to new ways of experiencing (Benedict 1948 in Rubenstein 2004:1048). Only later did I focus my attention on local logics of personhood, and furnish my direct experience of elephants as persons with theoretical justifications. It was the primacy of experience that enabled me to initiate a process of mutual becoming (Haraway 2008) through which Sitasma and I attuned our bodies and our selves, only possible because I was granted the privilege of apprenticing as an elephant handler, or *hattisare* as they are known in Chitwan.

From the outset, my hosts expressed the conviction that I could never truly understand their working life unless I too became a *hattisare*. This not only coincided with my methodological convictions about fieldwork as a form of apprenticeship, and the limitations of verbal exposition in learning and acculturation (Bloch 1991:194, Ingold 1993:222), but also with my personal hopes for a project inspired by Mark Shand's account of the relationship he developed with an elephant named Tara that he drove across India (Shand 1991). When the *adikrit subba*, the chief elephant handler, assigned me to apprentice with Sitasma Kali, a 20-year old female of good temperament who was always accompanied by her two-year old son Kha Prasad, I experienced a moment of ecstatic joy and excited anticipation. Rather than merely tolerated, I now felt my presence was fully accepted.

I understood his authorization as an endorsement of the experiential aspirations I held for my research, realizing that with this momentous decision he had

consolidated his position as patron of my research. No longer just a foreign researcher, I had now been admitted to the ranks as a novice handler, an honorary *hattisare*, obliged to diligently participate in the corporeal practices of elephant care, and to obey the members of Sitasma's care team. With my new status as something of a 'privileged idiot' I was able to engage in the daily routines and interspecies encounters of life in the *hattisar,* to experience otherwise unobtainable camaraderie, and most crucially, to develop my own physical and emotional relationship with an elephant.

The exertions of *hattisare* labour in the stable, in the jungles, grasslands, and rivers, as well as on elephant back, not only enabled me to appreciate the rigors of the elephant handling profession, but also to attempt to master new skills, including the sensual, embodied communication with nonhuman companions that only develops through sustained interaction between human and elephant selves. Few dispensations were made just because I was the foreign researcher. Thus, from the outset I had to ride Sitasma bareback, which at first was far from comfortable (better when loaded with bundles of cut grass), but it did allow me to learn the feel of her moving body and adapt my comportment to it. Indeed, the acquisition of bodily proficiency represented one of the foundational aspects of my apprenticeship with Sitasma.

My forays into the forests on elephant back represented more than just participation in authentic forms of *hattisare* practice, it was also about the sensuality of touch in communicating with, caring for, and being cared for by Sitasma. When I sat in the more comfortable and more intimate driving position, her warm ears flapping on my legs, I would be drawn to the alluring divot between the hemispheres of her gently bobbing head, I would stroke the curiously coarse hairs there, and I would enjoy the warm breath from her occasionally probing trunk that seemed to signify affection. I also demonstrated attentive care by swatting the flies whose bites draw blood. In so doing, I appreciated that she was sacrificing the opportunity to cover herself with protective soil by carrying a rider. If I dropped my stick (*kocha*), which I carried to

discipline her should the need arise, she would pick it up and hand it to me with her trunk. Such were the visceral delights and habits of affectionate care that characterized our kinesthetic union.

As companions together, Sitasma demonstrated personal recognition, intentionality, playfulness, attentive concern, and an ability to convey preferences and desires. As I would learn, these are constituents of what animal behavioral scientists identify as empathic consciousness (Byrne at al 2004). In my case though, the empathic relationship was one between species rather than among conspecifics. As such, before even asking myself if the typically anthropocentric concept of personhood could be legitimately extended, I experienced Sitasma not just as an individual, but as a person. Furthermore, I did so in a pre-theorized, phenomenological way since my direct, affective experience was produced by immersion in joint, inter-subjective action (see Ingold 1992). What had been originally conceived as an ethnographic study of human expertise in captive animal management could no longer be sustained as such. The elephants had become subjects of my research; they were also informants with whom I developed social relationships, from whom I learnt, and who thus challenged the humanist basis of ethnography that treats nonhuman beings as animate objects. I was yet to read an anthropological study of interspecies relations that treated nonhumans as ethnographic informants, but I realized I would have to write one.

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Reverence, Gift-Giving, and Identity

The significance of nutritional gifts represents another aspect of my apprenticeship that warrants attention. Not only relevant to building rapport with, and facilitating obedience from Sitasma, these gifts also provide insight into the reverential attitudes that inflect human relations with elephants in the *hattisar.* Every day, with the grass we had cut and transported from the interior of the National Park, we would make *dana*. These are grass packages filled with unhusked rice, salt, and molasses. These packages represent a crucial part of the elephants' supplementary diet, which help mitigate the time captive elephants

spend working rather than grazing, as they would in their wild state. However, they are also important as an item of exchange with which a handler mediates his relationship with his elephant. My initially clumsy attempts at making *dana* provoked laughter from my new human colleagues. I felt duty bound to invest my effort in perfecting their production though, since Ram Ekval, the chief of Sitasma's care team made it clear that these nutritional packages would be crucial for me to foster an effective relationship with Sitasma.

In India these grass packages are commonly called *kuchi,* but it is highly significant that in Nepal they are called *dana.* Although *dana* means gift, it is different from a merely mundane gift or *upavar.* Rather, *dana* connotes a religious offering. This became acutely meaningful to me when a *hattisare* named Satya Narayan made the following statement of apology during the training of a juvenile elephant called Paras Gaj: "We ride you as an inferior servant, but we know that you are a superior god" (Dugas and Locke 2010). It is understood that every elephant is imbued with the divine substance of Ganesh, a theriomorphic deity represented as a four-armed being with an elephant head. Combining the anthropoid with the elephantine, the symbol of Ganesh might be seen to reflect the parallel and paradoxical identities of god and devotee, master and servant in relations between handlers and elephants.

Thus, the giving of *dana* as a 'meal' in the afternoon after daytime grazing, and at other times as a 'snack' to secure cooperation, should not merely be seen instrumentally as a 'bribe', but also as an act of reverence by which you acknowledge the divinity inherent within the elephant, while also signifying your commitment to the companion upon whom your livelihood depends. Rather than representing an ideology that mystifies a purely transactional relationship, I found the meaning of *dana* for handlers was indicative of a relationship that binds human and elephant together in a condition of reciprocal mutuality.

Hattisare do not merely receive loyalty and obedience in exchange for preparing and giving *dana*, it is also one of many practices that engenders a loving

commitment, part of that process of mutual becoming to which I earlier referred. A young *hattisare* named Birendra explained: "Being without your elephant would be like chopping off your hand – it's because of our elephants that we can survive, and that's why we must love them". Birendra may be acknowledging his material dependence on his elephant for his livelihood, but he is also acknowledging how integral that relationship is to his social identity as a *hattisare*, and reciprocally, how important it is to discharge his duty to his elephant. The captive elephant is thus revealed as an icon of both livelihood and identity, for whom *hattisare* avoid distinguishing the sentimental from the instrumental.

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Autonomy, Consciousness, and Mutuality

The profound mutuality of this interspecies relationship became increasingly evident as I learnt other core duties of elephant care, the most important of which are taking your elephant to graze and to bathe. After early morning grass cutting, and the preparation of *dana*, we would take the first of our two daily meals of rice and lentils. Then it would be time to head out into the jungles, savannas, and rivers of the park in the heat of the day, returning mid-afternoon. This was the primary opportunity for Sitasma and I to become attuned to each other.

As in the vignette with which I began this article, upon mounting my elephant companion, I would reverentially touch Sitasma's flank with the first two fingers of my right hand before touching my forehead and my chest (signifying the heart), just as when one anoints oneself with tika powder as *prasad*; the consecrated leftovers from performing a devotional act of sacrificial worship. Ram Ekval explained to me that this was the *hattisare* way of acknowledging our elephant's divinity, and requesting the goodwill of Ganesh while riding his incarnation. Upon reflection, I came to realize that acts like these were not merely an aspect of the etiquette of human-elephant relations – they were also an implicit recognition of the elephant's autonomy, of their being-in-the-world, their capability to make their own decisions rather than just following our commands.

Just as no interpersonal relationship among humans can be truly considered unconditional, so it is between elephants and us. The elephant's commitment is conditional, but not just according to conventional understandings of Pavlovian positive reinforcement and other approaches to the behavioral processes and economic utilities of animal learning theory (Schultz 2006). There is more at stake than the fulfillment of an elephant's needs and appetites in exchange for obedience and cooperation. Such a purely instrumentalist view of the relation between behavior and physiology would only perpetuate the human exceptionalism arising from the human/animal dualism underlying humanist scholarship. In such models of animal domination there is little conceptual space to accommodate the dynamic mutuality of the human-elephant relationship integral to Nepali *hattisare* practice.

Like the *hattisare*, I came to understand 'my' elephant as a conscious person with desires not entirely dissimilar to my own, with whom I could develop a relationship involving meaningful, two-way communication, and crucially, as a being who could reject her human companion if she wished. Indeed, the unwritten social contract between human and elephant is typically severed as old age approaches, when the elephant chooses to retire itself through increasing absences from the stable. This is the time in their life when their final set of molars are wearing down, after which they will no longer be capable of digesting food.

Just as it took me time to appreciate the implication of autonomy in the act of reverence when mounting your elephant, so too the language of driving initially misled me. Although we spoke in terms that seemed to imply a perspective of handler-directed control and domination, it was only later that I realized this linguistic framing served to obfuscate what was also understood in terms of dynamic mutuality. Again, it was my affective and corporeal experience apprenticing with Sitasma that clarified the status of such commentaries. As I began my driving training the patient Ram Ekval showed me how to give

instructions by applying pressure with my toes behind Sitasma's ears, that intimate space of sensual contact only experienced by an elephant's driver. With his broad, welcoming grin he explained the various vocal commands handlers also use, and how to discipline Sitasma with a strike of the stick on her forehead. This instruction seemed to confirm a relationship of domination, albeit one tempered by the sensual engagement of human and elephant bodies familiar with each other. However, we both knew that instruction alone would be as sufficient as expecting someone to master riding a bicycle without trying to pedal unaided. Thus, Ram Ekval was bound to let me try for myself. More than merely the mechanics of an animate machine to master though, Sitasma represented a relationship to be engendered. With such an affable temperament she willingly let herself be driven by an inexperienced foreigner whom she had only known for a short time. It was within her power not to tolerate me if she did not want to, but gladly she did. Instruction was then, but a prelude to embodied and empathic learning, which not only defies verbal exposition, but also requires development of an interpersonal relationship between handler and elephant.

Sitasma was teaching me, elephantizing me even. A wiggle of her head would inform me I was misapplying my toes, her insistence on turning left when I was trying to turn right during grazing would be revealed not as disobedience on her part, but rather her way of directing me toward the plant matter she liked for food or medicine. I needed to know such things if we were to understand each other. By learning to be together we began operating with knowing synergy. The handlers confirmed this – of course your elephant teaches you, of course you have to develop an empathic understanding of each other, because "elephants are just like people too". This was a sentiment I heard many handlers express on many occasions, and the treatment of elephants as merely servile, animate machines (*cf* Ingold 1994:8) was a trope of cautionary tales in which bad handlers get what they deserve. My revelations were old news to my human colleagues, but my excited commentaries evoked a recognition of shared experience resistant to verbal articulation, of someone just beginning to acquire aspects of what the sociologist Philippe Bourdieu would describe as their habitus, and hence

someone who was beginning to experience their lifeworld as member of a shared, multispecies moral community.

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This was a lifeworld characterized by the intensive practices of interspecies encounter within a total institution housing a social community comprising humans and nonhumans. The *hattisare* Bukh Lal, who worked with the mighty tusker Birendra Prasad revealed the totalizing character of life spent with an elephant companion in the following comment: "I know my own elephant better than I know my own family". This was no surprise since he came from a once-forested district in the eastern Tarai more than a day's journey away. Bukh Lal was with Birendra every day, able to read his moods in ways I could not discern, and only reunited with his family a few times a year, during annual leave (*bida*). He could approach Birendra in ways that would be foolish for me to do, as I would dramatically learn for myself with a female elephant named Puja Kali. This was the case even when Birendra was in musth (*mada*) – a periodic state of hormonal excitation that can last a few months, during which a male becomes dangerous and unpredictable, his urge to procreate visibly evident, negating the usual relational bond of trust between handler and elephant. As Bukh Lal said: "At these times, he's out of control, he's not himself; he can't be held responsible for his behavior".

I was beginning to truly appreciate the possibilities of knowing intimacy between handler and elephant. The ritualized greeting I described in the vignette that began this presentation is instructive. Sitasma's act of 'hugging' me with her trunk was regular, it was mutually meaningful, and unlike the supplicatory gesture of reverence I have also described, it was a practice she herself initiated. Besides the strictly ethological interpretation of this pleasing embrace that enabled Sitasma to recognize my distinctive smell, I was well aware that making sense of this encounter raised questions about anthropocentric interpretation and the challenges of understanding interspecies sociality and communication. At the

time though, I was most interested in how the other handlers understood this practice. They claimed they could read their elephant's body language and recognize acts of affection in their behavior toward us. For me, it was an affective act of trusting surrender that signified the empathic connection we had developed.

The *hattisare* confirmed my interpretation of these regular and distinctive trunk probings as a greeting ritual – this was how some elephants were known to engage with human companions with whom they have a sustained, intimate, and dependent relationship. As my human colleagues pointed out, this was also a way for Sitasma to mark me as 'her human'. It confirmed the attainment of a trusting relationship, since I would be a fool to come into such close proximity unless I was confident of her benevolent attitude toward me. After all, an elephant can violently discard us like an unwanted toy if they wish. Indeed, I was told of a case in which this had happened. Five years before my arrival, Puja Kali, who resided next to Sitasma, had squashed her handler. Just as Bukh Lal excused Birendra's behavior during musth as 'temporary insanity', this event was not blamed on Puja Kali's temperament, but rather on the disrespectful behavior of her handler, who had fallen off her back in a drunken state. Significantly, this consensual defense of Puja Kali, either irritated or confused by her handler's irregular behavior, demonstrated that *hattisare* were willing to defend an elephant companion against a human colleague. This was perhaps not only indicative of the abhorrence of irreverence toward these gods in animal form, but also of the commensurable valuation of human and elephant forms of life in the multispecies moral community of the *hattisar.*

The entangled loyalties of human and elephant social life were also evident in the way that networks of human-elephant relations were determined both by human-to-human and elephant-to-elephant relations. I catalogued my knowledge of the *hattisare* with respect to the human-elephant teams of which they were a part. This influenced the pattern of my interaction with the handlers. Who your elephant was at least partially determined which of your human colleagues you

would mix with most. If your elephants were grazing friends you would be more likely to maintain friendly relations with each other. I was beginning to realize that me being 'Sitasma's human' raised more interesting questions than Sitasma being 'my elephant'

That greeting ritual between Sitasma and I did not merely confirm for me the trusting rapport that had developed between us, it also signified my acquisition of a particular identity for her, and also more generally for the whole community of Khorsor elephants. Their own patterns of conspecific interactions, inflected by personal preferences similar to those among humans, had great significance for their human companions. Understanding how intra-elephant relations articulate with intra-human relations through the coupling patterns that connect particular elephants to particular humans was then another important aspect of my apprenticeship. This was dramatically illustrated for me one morning when I walked close to Sitasma's neighbor Puja Kali, known to be an occasionally moody elephant. With a rapidity that surprised me, she came out from her tethering post and gave me a swift, reprimanding slap with her trunk. I was shocked by her speed, power, and accuracy. Wielded by Sitasma, the trunk had come to represent an instrument of loving connection, but wielded by Puja Kali it represented a weapon of hostility.

Convinced of the potency of the lesson I had learnt, an amused colleague remarked that in every future elephant encounter I should remember that I was marked as Sitasma's human (and again, this was the fault of my ignorance rather than cause to blame Puja Kali's temperament). I should have known that there was a history of hostility between Sitasma and Puja Kali, making me an enemy of Puja Kali by extension. Similarly, I was warned never to take Sitasma close to another female called Lakshmi Kali, since they too had a history of antagonism, with Sitasma bearing a scar on her haunch to prove it. The animosity between Sitasma and other elephants had an influence on my interaction with members of those elephants' human care teams. Since our interests diverged, we found ourselves likely to interact less.

Thus, through my own intimate, interspecies relationship I came to realize the importance of elephant life histories in relation to each other and in relation to *hattisare.* The career biography of a *hattisare* is intimately bound to that of his elephant, and these histories are constitutive of both species' personhood in their interwoven social worlds, sometimes discrete, sometimes overlapping. In terms of the concerns of ethnoelephantology and an 'anthropology beyond humanity', this illustrates the humanist problem in promoting a purely human history that denies the constitutive role of other species, to which Susan Nance responds with a call for a trans-species history (2013). However, the issue here is not just the agency of elephants, but their agency as intentional social beings. My basic familiarity with the philosophical problem of animal minds (e.g. Griffin 1984, 2001) meant that I knew I had to be cautious about making the apparently anthropomorphic attribution of personhood, unless of course I challenged the ontological assumptions upon which it relies (see Ingold 1994). In the field though, circumspection seemed irrelevant, and it seemed more useful to understand the cultural logic by which the *hattisare* understood their elephants as persons.

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Hattisare Understandings of Personhood

This then, is what I set about investigating. By considering *hattisare* conceptions of nature, authority, and the logic of caste, their extended attribution of personhood became intelligible, and in a way that emphasizes human-animal continuities without denying human-animal differences. Nature, as a domain exterior to inhabited dwellings and not ostensibly transformed by human activity (Ellen 1996), was not understood according to the dualistic modality of Western thought and its tradition of humanist scholarship. Rather than a clear separation of the domains of human culture and nonhuman nature, I discerned a sociocentric understanding in which nature and society are subject to the same organizing logic. The logic in this case is articulated through the idiom of substance,

considered typical of Hindu and South Asian thought (Marriott 1976, Marriott and Inden 1977).

In a world in which all life shares substance which varies according to the ratio of its component qualities, the three humoral *guna* of *satvas, rajas,* and *tamas,* which can be transmuted as a result of the effect of action or *karma*, and which determine rebirth in the cycle of life, or *samsara*, it follows that the ontological separation of animality, humanity, and divinity is permeable. In previous existences we may have dwelt as animals, but with the potential for godhood within us all, in a future existence we may be able to realize our intrinsically divine nature and ascend the hierarchy of being, just as a change of dietary and ritual practice can sometimes enable a social group to redefine its place within a caste hierarchy based on the idiom of ritual purity (Srinivas 1962). As Lawrence Babb remarks, the greeting of *namaste* (like the gesture of supplication upon mounting an elephant) may be translated as saluting that portion of god that dwells within you (1975:52).

In this sociocentric and hierarchical world, the jungle, savannas, and rivers to which we daily drove with our elephants are conceived as potentially dangerous and unpredictable places, subject however to the rule of deities, most significant of which is *Ban Devi,* the goddess of the forest. By conducting sacrificial rituals we acknowledged her sovereign authority, and appeased her potential wrath through the giving of gifts pleasing to what we might call her humoral 'substance-nature' (alcohol, meat, money, feminine items of beautification), and thereby militated against the misfortunes she might cause us, such as attack by dangerous animals. Similarly, we performed rituals to petition the goodwill of Ganesh, whose 'substance-nature' inhabits elephants. Elephant training is a time when such practices are most essential since it is imperative to acknowledge that the elephants we drive are also gods we worship (by giving sweets appropriate to Ganesh's 'substance-nature', evident in myths about his appetite and his representation with a fat belly), and to whom we must therefore request forgiveness.

This simultaneity of animality and divinity in elephants implies both low and high status in a hierarchical continuum of being. Puzzling upon this led me to consider how integral the logic of caste is to the handlers' hierarchical and sociocentric conception of nature and being. The Nepali word for caste, a group of beings sharing the same substance-nature, i.e. *guna* composition, whose interactions with other groups must be strategically and ritually mediated according to a rationale of purity, is *jat,* or in Hindi *jati.* This word means type, kind, or even species (Marriott and Inden 1977, Burghart 1984:116-118). Thus, I realized that for the handlers there was no problem in extending the logic of caste to elephants, it being as much an essentialist theory of kinds as a social theory of discrete, ranked groups (see Burghart 1978). Indeed, the Sanskrit genre of texts on elephantology, known as *gaja sastra*, which has parallels with oral traditions of practical elephant knowledge, recognizes eight ranked castes of elephant, understood in terms of *guna* composition (Edgerton 1931, Wakankar and Mhaiskar 2006, Locke 2008).

While most other nonhuman animals provide little incentive to transcend the typically human boundaries of caste, I realized that the indigenous logic of caste therefore holds the potential for extension beyond the human. As the recognized repository of both animal and divine substance, the elephant most certainly qualifies, confounding the typical hierarchical order. Hindu gods are understood and represented in anthropomorphic terms, and since the elephant is a god in animal form, it discloses a cultural logic by which handlers may think of their elephants as persons.

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Practical Experience and Animal Ethology

However, even as my reflections and my inquiries brought this interpretation into focus, I knew it was crucial that neither the handlers nor I needed such ideas to understand the relationships with our elephant companions in terms of person-to person relations. Irrespective of social and cultural conditioning, one could not resist recognizing elephant personalities. Practical experience taught us they have memories of prior experiences that influence their behavior and dispositions, that

they can effectively communicate preferences to non-elephants, that they possess reasoning and problem-solving ability, and that they demonstrate loyalty and affection (for a summary of the science of elephant personhood see Varner 2008). To deny this would be a betrayal of the lifeworld of the *hattisare* as persons involved in a process of becoming with their elephant companions (see Haraway 2008).

As such, the ascription of personhood appears as more than just an idiom of engagement, but rather as a mode of interpersonal, interspecies encounter. I was unconcerned, excited even, that it might seem that I was transgressing the injunction against anthropomorphism characteristic of most 20th century animal ethology. After all, one of the primary implications of Darwinian evolutionary biology has been to subvert the Cartesian segregation of humanity from animality, as Darwin acknowledged in "The Descent of Man" (see Willerslev 2007:114). It is interesting though that the need remains to reaffirm the ontological insight regarding the continuity of life. For example, Barbara Noske reminds us that ethological studies of primates, cetaceans, elephants, and wolves have proven that qualities usually considered uniquely human, such as sociality, intentionality, self-awareness, tool use, and even language, can also be found to varying degrees in our nonhuman relatives (1996). In response to the call to rethink the prejudice that insists on drawing a definitive line between us and them, cultural primatologist Frans de Waal has advanced the notion of 'anthropodenial' (2000). If anthropomorphism is the overestimation of commonalities between human and nonhuman animals, then 'anthropodenial' is the underestimation of such commonalities (Daston and Mitman 2005:9).

Conclusion

The experience of interspecies apprenticeship I have documented here contributes to the ethnographic study of skilled learning while also raising significant ontological and methodological questions for anthropology. As a result of the empathic and embodied relationship I developed with Sitasma Kali, I had to adapt my notions of apprenticeship learning, which at that time largely derived

from a literature concerned with acquiring skills in communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991, Lave 1993, Wenger 1998). Rather than understanding mastery of a craft, my challenge not only included the mastery of practical skills, but also the development of an intimate working relationship with a sentient nonhuman being.

This intensely affective experience was so profoundly transformative that I was compelled to extend personhood itself – my apprenticeship became an endeavor in learning how to interact with a nonhuman inter-subjectively, and to do so with communicative and empathic efficacy. In realizing for myself that elephants are people too, as well as encountering *hattisare* make the same assertion, the question arises how to make anthropological sense of a challenge to key ontological assumptions about human uniqueness. Here, recent developments in the animal cognitive and behavioral sciences became theoretically relevant for analyzing the data of my field experience, providing confirmation for insights gained from experiences of living and travelling with captive elephants in the streets, stables, jungles, and rivers of Chitwan.

By challenging the typically human boundaries of personhood this account also reveals the epistemological limitations of Enlightenment Humanism to which modern ethnographic practice is intellectually indebted. As a methodology within the social sciences, ethnography has developed as a way to study human social life that, until recently, critics have found inadequate for incorporating nonhuman, animate life. However, Posthumanist scholarship critiques the ontological dualisms that oppose cultural humans to natural animals, posing key questions about the knowledge practices that constitute the disciplinary configuration of Western thought responsible for the divergence of the social and natural sciences. As a consequence, new syntheses are emerging which reveal the intersecting relevance of ethnology and ethology (Lestel 2006) and which extend anthropology by insisting that the entanglement of other life forms with human lives, landscapes, and technologies must be theoretically integrated into accounts of human existence (see Kirksey and Helmreich 2010, Ingold 2013).

These new syntheses, the critical interrogation of nature/culture and human/animal dualisms, the complementary analytic role of cultural ethology, and my transformative experience becoming a *hattisare* with Sitasma Kali, have all contributed to the development of ethnoelephantology; a new, interdisciplinary framework for studying human-elephant intersections. In anthropology, geography, and history, research is emerging which explores "the intersecting lifeworlds and environmental mutualities of human and elephant" (Locke 2013:90). This includes, by way of a few indicative examples; accounts of the role of elephants in constituting transnational environmentalist networks, and as agents in shaping local landscapes of wildlife conflict in Yunnan (Hathaway 2013:152-184), accounts of elephants, alcohol, psychosocial suffering and bureaucracy in Assam (Jadhav and Barua 2012), and accounts of elephant agency in the 19th century American circus (Nance 2013). By demonstrating the shared, interspecies moral community that emerges from humans and elephants living and working together, I suggest we need to rethink human-elephant relations in a way that acknowledges their mutual agency as social actors.